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Glenn Livingston, Ph.D.

# How to Build Faster Rapport



Sharon Livingston, Ph.D.

The  
New York  
Times

Entrepreneur

ADWEEK

CRAIN'S  
NEW YORK BUSINESS

Originally trained as a psychologist, Dr. Glenn Livingston has helped literally thousands of clients. Along with his wife Sharon, he's sold consulting, teambuilding, and workshops to big names like AT&T, Nextel, Panasonic, Whirlpool, Novartis, Lipton, Colgate-Palmolive, Kraft, and Panasonic. Their work, research, and theories have been seen in major media publications like The New York Times, Entrepreneur Magazine, Crain's NY Business, AdWeek, America West, and more!

["According to Our Students We Run One of the Most Powerful Certification Programs for Coaches Who Want to Grow a Thriving Practice...And Now You Can TEST-DRIVE It for a \\$25 One Time Payment!"](#)



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## Introduction

How you interact with your clients in the first couple of sessions with them sets the tone for entire coaching relationship. That's why building rapport with new clients is so important. Building rapport helps you get and keep clients. Without great rapport-building skills, you'll be held back from having a successful coaching practice.

Fortunately, most coaches naturally excel at building rapport. Most coaches are warm, caring, and give potential clients the sense that they are driven to help others and have the skills to help them reach their goals. But even the most charming, charismatic coaches can use some help to build stronger rapport, or to increase their ability to do so quickly, with certain kinds of clients.

This extended cheat sheet lists of the most essential tips I know to help coaches build rapport and do it quickly. It's by no means a complete list. And I'm focusing primarily on coaches who work over the phone, so I haven't included tips for face-to-face meetings. Most of those tips, like making eye contact, are universal to building rapport with anyone. Most of my students work with clients on the phone, which makes building rapport a little more challenging. But with the right skills, you can easily make up for the fact that you and your clients can't see each other.

## What is rapport?

Rapport is the feeling of closeness you generate with other people. There's an element of understanding and the ability to communicate well with each other when you have rapport. It's the "click" you get with people that you are eager to get to know and like.

Every client isn't going to be easy to build rapport with. Many clients will feel like you just met a new friend. Others, however, will need a little bit more work before you have the same comfort level. That's why it's important to have a tool kit of techniques to build rapport. When what you do naturally doesn't work, you'll have other methods to fall back on.

## Why is it so important for coaches?

To successfully coach someone, they have to trust you. They have to feel like you understand their issues and can help them reach their goals. People in all sorts of fields build rapport with their clients, from sales people to doctors. But unlike other professions, a coaching client will decide often after only one meeting if they want to work with you. That's why being able to build rapport quickly is so important.

Clients tell the coaches very personal information about themselves. They need to be comfortable enough to tell you those things and trust you enough that you'll be discreet and non-judgmental. Clients need to know that you have their best interests at heart.

Developing a range of rapport-building strategies will help you earn that trust a lot faster.

## Rapport-building tips

Here are 35 of the best tips I know to build rapport. You'll notice many of them you use and weren't even aware of it. That's great, because you can remind yourself of these tips before you meet with every client. There will be some new skills as well that you can use on more difficult clients.

### Be yourself

Every expert on relationships, no matter what type, says that being your authentic self is the key to having good relationships with others. Unfortunately, the term "be yourself" has been used so often that we don't even really think about what it means anymore.

You've known people who seem to change depending on who is around them at the moment. Sometimes these chameleons are easy to see through, but other times they're

not. It's important to be yourself *so that you are the same person your client meets each session.*

It's difficult to have a relationship with somebody when you don't know who they are going to be day in or day out. You're a wonderful person just the way you are. Be that person, not somebody else.

Now, this doesn't mean you focus on your needs over theirs, or even try to equalize things as you might by being yourself in a marriage. The essence of a professional relationship means you're focusing primarily on your client's needs (*as long as they're paying you, attending the sessions on time, etc*)

But in the context of this structure you need to present the person you really are... not some "super coach" or ideal model you've got in your head.

### **Leave your personal negative experiences at the door**

We can't control the world around us, and sometimes coaches just have bad days. You may be upset because you found out one of your parents is seriously ill or frustrated because your car didn't start that morning. Take a few moments before you start your coaching session to take a few deep breaths, meditate, pray, or whatever you do to center yourself

### **Pay attention to how you feel about the client**

Sometimes interactions with clients can create negative feelings for the coach. The new client may remind of your brother-in-law that you can't stand. Or maybe you feel attracted to the client. Note what you are feeling and keep going. After the session, think about where those emotions are coming from. But don't let them throw you for a loop during the session. You aren't your feelings. And feelings aren't facts. They're simply data you use to help inform you about what's going on. Use them in the context of the client's goals.

You can always take focus off feelings you may be having by focusing on the client. Ask yourself what she may be feeling while discussing her goals with you. Shifting the focus onto the client helps to keep you focused.

### **Let your charisma shine**

Most coaches have charisma. You don't have to be a movie star or a statesman to be charismatic. Charisma is the ability to inspire others through your charm. It's the stock and trade of every coach. By being your helpful, exuberant, positive self, you will demonstrate your natural charisma to your clients. Charisma is when you make other people feel important. (*By the way, Burt Campbell, one of our [certified professional](#)*

*[coaches](#), bills himself as the Charisma Coach... and I think just about everyone could benefit from a session with him, including me!)*

What if you feel you need a little help developing charisma? Keep focused on your client. Remember little things they tell you about themselves, like where they grew up or went to college. John Kennedy, a man well-known for his charisma, was a master at remembering people's names. Not only that, he learned the names of the spouses and children of everyone he worked with. Just that little extra effort to ask about family members was inspiring to his staff and the press, who were often impressed that the most powerful man in the world remembered their son's name.

When I had a zillion and one clients and was working 45 to 50 sessions per week, one of the only things which kept me focused was knowing the names and relationships of the important people in each client's life.

## **Avoid distractions**

Keeping your focus on the client is difficult when you're trying to read texts and emails while you're in a session. Even telephone clients can tell when you've tuned out to multi-task, and it makes them feel like you aren't interested in them or how you're going to help them reach their goals.

Unless you are on it, turn off your cellphone before each coaching practice. Make sure tones that signal email and text alerts are turned off. Move away from your desktop, or close your laptop. Make sure any other distraction is outside of the room where you are conducting your coaching session.

## **Be empathetic**

Coaches are usually naturally empathetic, but during a session with a new client it's important to be intentional about showing them you understand and care about them.

Repeating back to them what they've told you. Ask them if you understand them correctly. If the client has a positive identification with you, you can also consider sharing (a little) a personal experience which makes it clear you can empathize with what they're going through because you've been through something similar yourself.

## **Be curious**

Coaching a new client is like reading a new book or exploring a new world. Besides wanting to help people, an innate sense of curiosity is one of the main reasons that people decide to be coaches.

You show you're curious about your client by listening and asking questions. People feel good when they think that someone cares enough about them to want to get to know them. You do that by being curious.

In many ways you can think of a coaching relationship as the ongoing exploration of what successfully motivates your client, and what stops them from progressing. You become a witness to their life, their goals, and their underlying inspiration. It's VERY engaging and fulfilling for the client.

## **Share something about yourself**

The coaches I instruct have an origin story, a story that tells how they overcame something in their life that made them want to help others overcome the same problem. If you have a web site, your new client has most likely read your origin story, but it's a good idea at some point during the first meeting to bring it up again.

Sharing something about yourself makes you a little vulnerable. A client meeting with a coach for the first time often feels very vulnerable. Sharing in the vulnerability with him helps him to feel like you're both in the same boat, which builds rapport.

That said, you don't want to make a habit of sharing so much about yourself that the client gets confused about who the coach is, or that there's not enough room for them to discuss their needs. Just enough to make it clear you're on a mission... you're not just in this for the money.

## **Match the client's communication style**

Pay attention to how your client likes to communicate and attempt to match her style. If you are by nature a loud, commanding presence, tone it down a couple of notches for the client who is very quiet and shy. The goal here is to try to match the energy that the client has while she's communicating with you.

Matching the client's communication style helps to increase their comfort level. It also helps them feel like you "get" them when you communicate like them.

## **Mirror words and speech patterns**

If you listen closely to your client, you'll find that he uses key words and phrases as he talks. You'll also notice particular speech patterns. Maybe he speaks quickly in short



sentences. Or maybe he uses a lot of adjectives to describe what's going on in his life. Like matching a client's communication style, mirror words and speech patterns makes a client feel understood on a deep level.

## **Keep your commitments and promises**

Be on time to your first few appointments with a new client. If you say you're going to do something, like look up the title of a book for them to read, do it and either email it to them between sessions or have it for them for the next session. Keeping your commitments and promises is essential in building rapport.

Most clients understand when emergencies come up, but keep those to a minimum, especially during the first few sessions while you are establishing a relationship. Your clients need to know that you are a person of integrity – that you do what you say – before they will fully trust you.

## **Do things for them in between sessions**

Clients like to know that you are thinking about them when you aren't on the clock. They pay you for your sessions, so any indication they're on your mind in between is like getting a free gift. Talk to them about an article you read which reminded you about what you're helping them work on. And if there's a very significant event in their lives you can consider calling in between to check with them to see how it went.

I know this is controversial and I'm not recommending you do it casually... but when you you're your client could really use the dose of extra support and you think it might make all the difference to their being able to move forward in their lives, by all means, do it!

*(Sharon and I had a professional call us the day we got married. He knew we were extremely stressed because our families were dead set against us being together... it made all the difference in the world in our feeling solid together. As evidenced by our 26<sup>th</sup> anniversary last month!)*

You don't have to spend a lot of time and effort, and your client will love you for thinking about them.

## **Point out common ground**

Have you ever noticed when you make a new friend it's because you have something in common? Maybe your kids are on the same soccer team. Maybe you took the same class. People tend to be attracted to other people who have shared the same experiences.

In your first couple of sessions, you'll learn a lot about your client. Maybe she has a dog. If you have a dog, consider sharing it with her. *(Not the dog itself... the fact that you*

*have one!*) Spending a few minutes establishing shared experiences can help to build rapport much faster.

Notwithstanding the above, you don't want to share too much about your personal life, too soon with a client, because it's also possible this will interfere with their ability to talk about other things. You'll get the hang of this delicate balance over time... but in the beginning, it's usually better to err on the side of sharing a little too much. *(Because rapport is essential for the coaching relationship to continue)*

## Laugh

Laughing actually does our body good. It releases hormones that improve our mood and improves the intake of oxygen. Some studies find that laughing helps relieve pain and boosts the immune system. Laughing with your client also helps to build a closer relationship.

Laugh at a funny story that your client tells you, or tell one of your own. It will help relieve some of the stress she is feeling about being in a new situation.

## Call them by their name

Saying someone's name to them periodically while you're talking with them makes them feel more valued. Have you ever been having a meaningful conversation with someone and got the feeling that they have had the same conversation with a dozen other people that day? Saying someone's name periodically lets them know that you are talking with them, not just a random person. It's particularly important to do this if you are coaching people over the phone.

Don't overuse a person's name when you talk to them. It's a common sales tactic to repeat someone's name virtually every sentence, and you don't want to sound like a car salesman. But saying their name at the beginning, end, and once in the middle of a session is a great way to continue forming a bond.

## Treat them like you've known them for years

We've all met people who we've known for just a few days but feel like we've known them for years. Part of the reason we get this feeling is because of sharing common ground, but the majority of the reason we feel like we've known people longer than we have is because we act like they are old friends from the beginning.

So how do you treat somebody like an old friend in a professional relationship like coaching? Stay professional, but be warm and friendly. Resist the urge to be formal, even if the client is a little reticent. Talk to them comfortably and informally, like you would a friend, while maintaining your professionalism.

## Break the ice

Before you tackle the seriousness of a client's need for your coaching, spend a few minutes chatting. Many coaches have the ability to make small talk, but if you don't, consider starting the first session with a random question or two unrelated to your niche, like, asking what the client did on her favorite birthday or asking about the client's hobbies. You'll often find common ground during a few minutes of idle talk, and it helps you to bond with your client.

Ask simple factual questions to help the client feel comfortable. "How did you get here today? What bus did you take?"

Small talk is only small talk when it doesn't serve a function. If used skillfully, you're actually building the foundation which makes deep, soulful sharing possible!

## Acknowledge changes in tone

Your new client has been exuberant talking about a new project he is working on, but when you ask about how his relationship is with his wife, he's suddenly quiet. It's important in every coaching session to mention to the client that you've noticed a change in their tone or their mood.

It's even more critical to acknowledge these things during the first few coaching sessions. Mentioning these changes in mood lets the client know that you are listening closely and that you understand there's something in discussing the topic that has changed the way that they feel. Clients appreciate that someone is paying attention to these changes, most likely because few people ever mention them.

## Smile while you talk

Have you ever noticed that you can tell when someone is smiling when they are talking to you on the phone? Our voices sound a little different, and sometimes the joy is contagious. Smile, when it's appropriate, when you are coaching clients on the phone. They hear the difference, and it generates positive feelings toward your coaching relationship.

## Ask open-ended questions

Asking open-end questions – questions that don't require a "yes" or a "no" – gives clients the ability to talk. In most coaching sessions, the client should be doing most of the talking. Asking open-ended questions gives them the opportunity to say what's often been on their mind for a while. Giving a new client the ability to talk will help build your relationship.

Develop active listening skills so that you can let the client know you are not only listening, but hearing them while they are answering your open-ended questions.

Notwithstanding the above, if your client seems uncomfortable in response to open ended questions, balance them with the simple, factual questions previously reviewed to maintain their motivation.

## **Be encouraging**

Encouragement is one a coach's primary purposes in a client relationship. Many people don't get encouragement on a regular basis, or maybe don't get the kind of encouragement they need. Some people respond well with simply a statement that things will get better or that they've got this. Some people require a little more convincing. You can use examples of your own successes or others to give your new client a little hope that they will overcome the obstacles keeping them from reaching their goals.

## **Listen for discomfort**

Remember the first time you parents took off your training wheels and you were able to ride a bike on your own? You probably rode it well for a few seconds, then realized you were doing it and lost your confidence and fell.

This happens sometimes with new clients. They get the confidence to be honest and open with you and then suddenly get frightened or uncomfortable. Listen carefully for signs of discomfort, like a change in tone, shutting down, or a change in breathing patterns. It's OK to move on to another topic and return to the difficult one later (*or in a future session*).

## **Point out the positives**

Many coaching clients, if not all of them, feel some sort of negative emotion about needing help. They may feel shame, anger, or low self-esteem. They've probably had tapes playing in their heads that repeat negative thoughts to them.

You can change their lives no matter what your coaching niche by starting immediately pointing out the positives in your client's situation. Reframe their negative thoughts into positive ones that will give them the power and encouragement to face their obstacles head-on.

## Be professional and competent

Anyone can hang up a shingle and call themselves a coach. Sometimes clients have had negative experiences with coaches that haven't gotten the [necessary training](#) to guide them toward setting goals and creating a road map to get there.

Be different by learning all the coaching techniques you can. Get certified, but don't stop. Get your own coach or attend supervision so that you can get feedback on your coaching skills. Seek out continuing education opportunities in your niche to keep up with the latest developments.

Professional coaches have contracts. As part of your first session, go over your contract with your client. It should have information about payment, cancelling appointments, and other details that outline what you expect from them and what they should expect from you.

## Don't be afraid of silence

Long pauses are common in coaching sessions. Clients need to process what they just heard or think about what they want to say. It may be difficult for some coaches to sit through these pauses, especially over the telephone. Let the silence go on for 15 to 20 seconds. Ask if the client is OK. If they say they are, then ask if you can move on to another question.

## Breathe with them

People who practice yoga or other forms of meditation say that paying attention to your breathing is incredibly powerful. It allows you to focus and still your mind. Another aspect of breathing that creates rapport is to match your client's breathing. Doing so touches people on a deep level and helps to increase the rapport with your client.

## Anticipate their needs

Clients sometimes have no clue what they need when they first meet with a coach. Some think they know what they need but may need something else entirely. One of the ways you can build rapport is anticipating what your client will need and make sure to get it for them.

Sure, if you are a weight-loss coach you can have your clients look up the daily allowances for calories and food groups, but it's nice to have a handout for them or a place to point to on your web site where they can easily get the information. Maybe your personal finance client knows how to create a budget but doesn't know the most effective way to do it. Have links available to good low-cost or free budgeting software that is easy to use.

Figure out what your clients will need before they even think to ask. Giving some tools early on in the coaching process will help them move on their way to reaching their goal and build your relationship with them.

## **Provide them a photo or two of you**

One of the downsides with coaching people over the phone is that you are a disembodied voice. It's perfectly appropriate to provide access to a photo or two of yourself. You can do this in a number of ways. One is to make sure there is a professional photo or two of you on your web site. The other is to include a photo of you on your email signature. If you have a social media presence, post a photo of yourself periodically. People like to be able to picture who they are talking to on the other end of the phone. Give them an image.

## **Be honest**

One of the reasons clients seek out coaches is to get honest feedback. Sometimes people who are close to us are afraid of hurting our feelings or damaging our relationships by telling us the truth. Part of the reason is that they don't have the skills to give constructive feedback.

As a professional coach, you know how to give a client honest feedback with recommendations for improvement. Be honest and help your clients move forward. Your honesty will deepen the coach-client relationship... as long as it's truly constructive. *(And you judge that based upon the impact over time)*

## **Be solution-based**

One of the reasons you are a successful coach is because you have a solution to someone's problem. But many coaches forget to focus on solutions... instead finding themselves drifting in the client's emotional, intellectual, or playful ramblings.

You do want to learn everything you can about the client and the problems they've had reaching their goal, but it's important to help them to stay focused on the solution. Not dwelling on the problem keeps clients from getting overwhelmed or intimidated.

Remind your client of solutions which worked for you and for others so they know by extension it very well may work for him. Offering a solution is something a client respects and strongly desires. Offering the solution will build rapport.

## **Be non-judgmental**

Part of the coaching relationship is to listen without judgment. People who seek out coaches often feel shame and fear of judgment. They beat themselves up over not having whatever they need to reach their goal. Maybe family or friends have added to their self-blame.

As their coach, you are listening without judging their behavior. They aren't in a spot to seek in your approval – at least not at the beginning of your coaching relationship. What they need in the beginning is a safe place where they can talk about their struggles. Provide that space.

## **Offer praise**

People love to receive recognition. Some of your coaching clients will thrive on it more than others, but everyone likes to receive praise. Simply making the decision to seek out a coach to help with a problem is a big step in changing the way they deal with the obstacles to their goals. Be sure to let them know that. You can say something like, "Denise, I'm really glad we got to know each other a little better today. You've already made progress toward your goal by asking for help. That's hard for most people to do, and you did it. Congratulations!" You can find something to praise your client for during every session.

## **Be aware of their sensory modality**

Every person perceives the world in a different way. Experts on behavior determined that we usually experience the world in one of three ways – visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. It's helpful as a coach to listen to clients to determine which way they primarily experience the world so that you can better communicate with them.

Visual people experience the world primarily through sight and are the most common sensory modality. They are followed by the auditory group, which experiences things primarily through hearing. Kinesthetic people experience the world by feeling things.

You can usually tell how a client experiences the world by what they say. "I don't see how I can do that" would be a comment from a person who experiences the world visually. "I hear you," is something someone who is auditory would reply to you. Kinesthetic people, the least common of three, will say things like, "I feel that might work."

You can acknowledge that you are listening to a visual person by saying, "I see." Match your responses to their modality. You'll communicate on a deeper level and build better rapport.

## Protect your client from developing intimacy too fast

Although building rapport quickly with a client is desirable, don't build it too deeply too quickly. Clients who feel like they revealed too much in the first session or two may end the relationship before you can even make any progress.

You can slow them down by asking them yes or no questions while they are revealing themselves to you during their open-ended questions. If you sense a client may be revealing too much too soon, stop them by asking a non-judgmental question about what they just told you that requires them to focus elsewhere, just briefly. An example would be, "Did you just say your husband said that?" or "Did you do that before or after college?"

You are protecting your client by keeping him from developing an intimate coaching relationship with you too quickly. Although it sounds counter-intuitive, slowing them down builds rapport in the long term.

## Be humble and human

Everybody makes mistakes, even coaches. You'll inadvertently misunderstand what a client is telling you. You may get distracted and miss a critical piece of information. Whatever mistake you commit, you'll go a long way in repairing your rapport by being humble and human.

Being humble means that you simple will admit that you were wrong. We all have lessons we continue to learn in life, and while we learn lessons we make mistakes. Having humility means that we own up to our mistakes and try to make amends however we can. It doesn't mean that we own up to other people's mistakes, so don't fall in that trap. After you've made a mistake, don't continually apologize for it or bring it up. Humans make mistakes. You are coaching your client to admit their mistakes and move on, so do the same for yourself. Don't beat yourself up. Just be human.

## Conclusion

Building rapport is part of the fun of being a coach. You get to know interesting people and create lasting relationships. Use the gifts you've already acknowledged to build rapport with your clients, but be willing to try some new techniques if you find your go-to techniques aren't as effective.





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Originally trained as a psychologist, Dr. Glenn Livingston has helped literally thousands of clients. Along with his wife Sharon, he's sold consulting, teambuilding, and workshops to big names like AT&T, Nextel, Panasonic, Whirlpool, Novartis, Lipton, Colgate-Palmolive, Kraft, and Panasonic. Their work, research, and theories have been seen in major media publications like The New York Times, Entrepreneur Magazine, Crain's NY Business, AdWeek, America West, and more!

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